An example of how organic agriculture gets hyped by the media:

I am quoted in a story in the May 31 Los Angeles Times ("Organic Farms Viable Despite Lower Yields, Study Finds") about a new study in Science, also published today a study comparing organic, biodynamic, and "conventional" farming systems in Switzerland. Too bad the reporter, Emily Green, who interviewed me for an hour on Wednesday, decided to ignore my strongest points. While she mentioned my argument that the study didn't compare modern no-till farm systems and so is a comparison between the latest organic and the "old-school" conventional methods she didn't explain that or include any of my subsequent points. She ignored the fact that no-till achieves the same improvements in soil structure, organic matter, water infiltration capacity, etc. that the most advanced organic techniques do perhaps even outperforming them and, more important, does it with about one-third the energy usage of either the organic or "old-style" conventional systems, which use laborious plowing and tilling to control weeds.

She ignored my criticisms of bogus "research" by another of her sources: Bill Liebhardt of the Rodale Institute Research Center. He has issued reports purportedly showing 95% yield equivalency in organic farming. Leibhardt cherry-picked his yield comparisons, deliberately including continuous corn rotations compared to organic corn-wheat-soybean rotations. When you compare similar rotations in the studies Leibhardt supposedly looked at, organic consistently come up 20-40% short of "conventional" yields.

While characterizing my comments as the "industry" response in her article even though the Center for Global Food Issues where I work is a non-profit research institute supported by unrestricted grants and is not a spokesperson for any industry Ms. Green fails to point out that the lead researcher in the Science study, Paul Mader, works at the Research Institute for Organic Agriculture, which is funded in large part by the organic industry. For example, RIOA co-maintains databases with the UK's Soil Association, the multi-billion dollar organic industry trade association. So who is the industry spokesperson here? Ms. Green also failed to mention that Leibhardt's employer, the Rodale Institute, is funded by the organic industry. Again, we're essentially equal in working for non-profits supported by grants, but somehow I'm an industry spokesperson and they're "independent." Based largely on their comments, her article title announces that organic agriculture is "viable despite lower yields."

In what sense are organic crops "viable" and to whom, if they have lower yields? They are only viable to a small niche group of farmers (given that all the other existing consumer-side research shows the organic market is not elastic) who can find wealthy consumers willing to pay two to three times more for food that has no demonstrable benefits over less costly conventional foods.

Regardless of Green's bias, this study confirms what responsible scientists have been saying all
along: organic farming systems get significantly lower yields and result in more disease and more weeds. No-till is a significant improvement and biotech makes no-till possible for many more crops at much lower cost. Moreover, there's no way that organic systems will be able to keep up with biotech-driven advances in crops in the coming years and decades. That's the real story, if the Los Angeles Times is interested.

Alex Avery is Director of Research and Education of the Center for Global Food Issues at the Hudson Institute.

Responses:
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It is my belief that organic farming is a viable alternative to conventional methods on the grounds that much of what is produced commercially is wasted or otherwise unnecessary, either deliberately destroyed to keep the market price high, spoiled en route to its final destination, or destined to end its days as cellulitic adipose deposits.

This process is driven by profit, not need. In the developed world few people are without adequate food. The majority of civilized nations are suffering due to excess food. Only in times of utter excess can good, wholesome plants be ruined through processing, which extends the shelf life via removal of any real nutritive value. This is done not because people lack adequate storage facilities but because demand is so far behind supply. The amount of investment which goes into producing, packaging, merchandising, and distributing certain so-called food products that have no health-giving qualities (only calories) and which makes them the cheapest articles in the supermarket (and therefore staple diet items of the poorest) is an utter crime. Value added = goodness removed.

Organic farming is about the health of the consumer and sustainability of the planet. Financial viability appears to necessitate the opposite. How much is enough? [1] When it comes to profit...even the world is not enough? [2]

Of course, sick people create the greatest revenue, and that is why organic farming is not economically viable, in my limited opinion. Thank you.

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